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ABSTRACT

It is unlikely that Harvard University (Massachusetts) considered "outcomes assessment" for its first class of nine students in 1640, and most certainly the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States did not offer a public relations curriculum. A short history of education in the United States shows increasing numbers of students attending college, while interest shifts from Ancient Greek Classics to science and math. Although the United States is recognized as the leader of education in the world today, criticism of the educational system is widespread. Indeed, to many it appears that students have been entering college unprepared and that they are leaving 4 years later with a degree but little value added. During the past decade, consequently, demands for accountability have resulted in the mandate for "outcomes assessment" to better measure what students are learning. Misguidedly, educators in public relations have not been much involved in discussions about outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment could do much for public relations. For a professional community, outcomes assessment should occasion deliberation about what public relations is, together with appropriate definitional parameters. Educators need to consider what knowledge and skills practitioners must have and what are suitable valid and reliable measurements to determine whether a practitioner has these skills. Make no mistake about it, discussions of outcomes assessment will determine the agenda of universities into the next century. (Contains 35 notes and 30 references.) (TB)

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ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATION IN JOURNALISM

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"Public Relations Education and Outcomes Assessment: An Immediate Challenge For Educators"

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"Public Relations Education and Outcomes Assessment: An Immediate Challenge for Educators"

INTRODUCTION

It is unlikely Harvard had considered "outcomes assessment" for its first class of nine students in 1640, and most certainly the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States didn't offer a public relations curriculum.

However, for many of the 3,300 colleges and universities in the United States today--with their 14 million students in what has become a $100 billion industry[1]--formalized "outcomes assessment" has become a requisite concern. Furthermore, hundreds of educators at many of these institutions are now having to grapple with how to assess the educational "outcomes" of their public relations students who are planning careers in professional practice.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U. S. HIGHER EDUCATION

To best understand how "outcomes assessment" relates to public relations education, a brief history is helpful that outlines the evolution of higher education in the United States. Colonial American colleges followed the British tradition, in which a prescribed three-to-four-year course of study earned a bachelor's degree for their students,[2] most of whom would become ministers, teachers, lawyers and statesmen[3] with perhaps a few relegating themselves to the more leisurely occupation of "gentleman."

Students were exposed to a "classical" education. This uniform curriculum began with Latin and Greek (to impose rigor as well as to teach logic, grammar and rhetoric), followed by mathematics, natural philosophy, geology, biology and astronomy. Such preliminary coursework led to studies in philosophy and culminated in a course in moral philosophy--the latter commonly taught by the college president.[4]

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[1]Clark Kerr in association with Marian L. Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond* (Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 19.

[2]Paul Shore, *The Myth of the University: Ideal and Reality in Higher Education* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1992), 142.

[3]George H. Douglas, *Education Without Impact: How Our Universities Fail the Young* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1992), 13.

[4]Charles W. Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of the University, the Aims of Liberal Education, the Competence of*

Institutions of higher learning changed greatly during the 19th Century! A rising patriotism in the United States prompted the accusation that a classical education ignored indigenous history and culture.[5] In the early 1800s, students already were clamoring for more courses in the physical sciences; however, when these classes were adopted, they were oftentimes relegated to separate schools.[6]

Nevertheless, elective courses were added to permit students some discretion in their subject matter; by 1900, most students were allowed to choose a major.[7] This concept of a range of course offerings that had diffused from Harvard to other U. S. colleges and universities during the latter two decades of the 19th century fostered the belief that larger society could help define a suitable college curriculum.[8]

Such electives also suggested there no longer was an implicit relationship among courses--nor a requisite hierarchy of course progression.[9] To illustrate this emerging diversity of instruction, Jacoby describes the impact of the Land-Grant Act to broaden the scope of higher education:

> After the Civil War the pressures intensified to reform curriculum and to open wider the college gates. The Morrill Act, or Land-Grant Act, passed in the midst of the Civil War, accelerated the collapse of the classical curriculum. Inasmuch as it provided federal support for colleges that included agricultural and mechanical arts, it spurred the shifting of resources from classical studies to sciences and modern languages. It also facilitated the democratization of higher education.[10]

Citizens, and the Cultivation of Practical Reason (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 31.

[5]Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 95-96.

[6]Ronald D. Simpson and Susan H. Frost, *Inside College: Undergraduate Education for the Future* (New York: Plenum Press, 1993), 118.

[7]Ibid., 35.

[8]Paul Shore, *The Myth of the University: Ideal and Reality in Higher Education*, 122.

[9]Charles W. Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of the University, the Aims of Liberal Education, the Competence of Citizens, and the Cultivation of Practical Reason*, 31.

[10]Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America*, 98.

Curricular offerings of colleges and universities during this era expanded to provide students with educational preparation for a wide range of production-oriented occupations needed in an increasingly industrialized nation during a time when the scientific method was becoming dominant and as America was becoming increasingly heterogeneous.[11]

During this time, higher education in the United States experienced its greatest growth within its relatively short history--with the predominance of "classical" colleges and education yielding to the newly defined mission of land-grant schools and research universities.[12]

By the 1870s, a particular type of U. S. university had evolved that was distinctly modeled after the German universities. Before the Civil War, the term "university" referred to a college having an affiliated professional school.[13] However, the new university had a revised role and identity. The legacy of undergraduate education was being superseded by a research mission and graduate instruction.

In the German tradition, scholarship became the organized production of knowledge--the antithesis of the United States' historic norm in education.[14] Yale awarded the first earned Ph.D. in 1861, quickly followed by like presentation of such research degrees from several other universities. The trend was begun to associate this terminal degree with the holder's competence to teach at the university level.[15] In 1900, the research universities formed the Association of American Universities to help standardize Ph.D. requirements.[16]

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[11]Clark Kerr in association with Marian L. Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond*, 147.

[12]Ibid., 71.

[13]George H. Douglas, *Education Without Impact: How Our Universities Fail the Young*, 20.

[14]Charles W. Anderson, *Prescribing the Life of the Mind: An Essay on the Purpose of the University, the Aims of Liberal Education, the Competence of Citizens, and the Cultivation of Practical Reason*, 23-24.

[15]Paul Shore, *The Myth of the University: Ideal and Reality in Higher Education*, 142.

[16]Ronald D. Simpson and Susan H. Frost, *Inside College: Undergraduate Education for the Future*, 5.

Following World War II, the research mission of U. S. higher education continued to grow during an era when more new knowledge was amassed since 1950 than in all the preceding eons of civilization.[17] Additional impetus (and accompanying anxiety) to this preoccupation with research was prompted by a singular incident in 1957: the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik that merged the computer to the satellite--essentially allowing for the telecommunications industry, among other innovations. Gilley observes:

> By 1970, the growing power of science and technology had begun to supplant the old industrial economy with a new information-driven economy. (By coincidence, the industrial economy began dominating the agricultural economy nearly a century before--about 1870).[18]

The launch of that Soviet satellite did much to shake the United States' complacency and sense of global scholarly superiority; indeed, it took only a year after Sputnik orbited the earth for the U. S. Congress to pass the National Defense Education Act--massively funding education in science, mathematics and languages.[19] Such interest in research, especially in science and technology, continues among U. S. colleges and universities as this nation recognizes the demands of an increasingly technological society. Millard opines that the information-technology revolution has become to the last half of the 20th and the 21st Centuries as was the Industrial Revolution to the 19th and first half of the 20th Centuries.[20]

He's undoubtedly correct! U. S. colleges and universities have continued to support this revolution with the same fervor in their research agendas as has been their legacy in contributing to the nation's economic growth and development since the Civil War.[21]

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[17]Ibid., 35.

[18]J. Wade Gilley, *Thinking About American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 1.

[19]Russell Jacoby, *Dogmatic Wisdom: How the Culture Wars Divert Education and Distract America*, 5.

[20]Richard M. Millard, *Today's Myths and Tomorrow's Realities: Overcoming Obstacles to Academic Leadership in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 209.

[21]Mary Lindenstein Walshok, *Knowledge Without Boundaries: What America's Research Universities Can Do for the Economy, the Workplace, and the Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 163.

U. S. HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

U. S. colleges and universities also have had an admirable, if not stellar, record of serving their primary constituency, i.e., in providing education for large numbers of students.

These percentages of enrollment among the 18- to 21-year-old national population throughout the years attest to a progressively greater record of service to such traditional students:

3 percent in 1890 of the 18- to 21-year-old population
16 percent in 1940
30 percent in 1950
40 percent in 1990 (50 percent attend at some point in their lives)[22]

Simpson reports that, from World War II to the 1970s, the traditionally aged college student population dramatically increased, although the numbers were declining by the 1980s.

Nevertheless, data from the 1990 census suggest that the pool of traditionally aged college students will once again increase in the latter 1990s and into the next century. It is estimated that more than 16 million students will attend U. S. colleges and universities by the year 2002.[23]

Today, the United States remains the undisputed global leader in higher education of its citizens.[24] Furthermore, Kerr notes that the United States is recognized as the world's center of higher learning. Interestingly, this distinction has shifted throughout history from Greece in the classical age; to the Muslim world in the Middle Ages; then successively to Italy (1540-1610), France (1770-1830), Germany (1810-1920) and the United States (1920-90).

Kerr observes that the pattern since 1540 has been for leadership to last an average of 80 years.[25]

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[22]Clark Kerr in association with Marian L. Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond*, 5-6.

[23]Ronald D. Simpson and Susan H. Frost, *Inside College: Undergraduate Education for the Future*, 7.

[24]Clark Kerr in association with Marian L. Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *Troubled Times for American Higher Education: The 1990s and Beyond*, 71.

[25]Ibid., 27.

SOME CONTEMPORARY CRITICISMS OF U. S. HIGHER EDUCATION

U. S. institutions of higher learning--at face value--have had an admirable track record and a proud tradition, both in research and in teaching. But do they enjoy the accolades of a grateful government and people; do taxpayers cheerfully encourage legislators to allot more funding to expand university programs; are students appreciative of the efforts of the cadre of dedicated professors serving them?

The answer is a resounding no! U. S. higher education's proud legacy of accomplishment is not universally lauded, and probably for a plethora of valid reasons. Complaints from many quarters have been forthcoming, particularly in the early 1990s when manifold books and articles attacked the academy and the professoriate.[26]

Increased public skepticism seemed especially directed toward the research universities, which criticism Walshok says comes in large part from constituents' concern about the willingness and ability of research universities to diffuse its new knowledge to wider communities and in forms amenable to solving contemporary social and economic problems.[27]

But a still more fundamental problem has been present. A range of constituents, especially during the past three decades, have questioned the methods and the very role of higher education in the United States today, i.e., with what is being taught and how it is being taught.

In particular, many constituents have been dissatisfied about the university's success with one of its primary products, i.e., the student. Many of those dissatisfied have been the students, themselves. Indeed, to many it appeared that students were entering college unprepared and that they were then being awarded their college degrees with apparently very little "value added." And it was relatively easy for everyone to pass the buck, blaming those educators preceding them for the failure of the students. Sadovnik observes:

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[26]For a sampling of such literature, see the bibliography at the end of this paper.

[27]Mary Lindenstein Walshok, *Knowledge Without Boundaries: What America's Research Universities Can Do for the Economy, the Workplace, and the Community*, 25-26.

> During the 1960s and 1970s, a growing literature on the problem of the underprepared student emerged as significant numbers of this population entered the open access institutions. Moreover, as it became clear that underpreparation was not a small problem localized to the new minorities in the system, but was instead endemic to significant numbers of majority students as well, colleges began to direct serious efforts at the amelioration of these deficits.[28]

If such students were coming to college unprepared, there was not overwhelming confidence that college was doing much for them by the time they were being graduated. If not a panacea to resolve such problems, a better means to at least monitor students' achievement seemed by many to be some type of "outcomes assessment," an oftentimes vague, albeit more comprehensive, measurement of what students were learning.

During the past decade in particular, demands from several quarters for "accountability" have resulted in the mandate for such "outcomes assessment" to better measure what students are learning. There was a general feeling that higher education's current assessment methods were inadequate and unidimensional and thereby lacked credibility.[29] The National Governor's Association was a major proponent for this movement, with the gubernatorial leaders declaring assessment would be a catalyst to improve educational quality.

Furthermore, they reasoned, such assessment would help define the mission of each institution and would encourage the use of assessment information for program improvement. Today, outcomes assessment is mandated or is about to be mandated in a majority of states.[30]

Millard warns:

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[28]Alan R. Sadovnik, *Equity and Excellence in Higher Education: The Decline of a Liberal Educational Reform* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 28.

[29]T. Dary Erwin, *Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Guide to the Principles, Goals, and Methods of Determining College Outcomes* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 4.

[30]Ibid., 1-2.

> Regardless of what initially may have led to the "new assessment" movement, it has become a fact of academic and institutional life and one that rather clearly links the academic and political communities. As of 1990, forty states required some form of assessment, either by law or as carried out by the higher education agency....[31]

Calls for "outcomes assessment" are particularly problematic for public relations educators representing an ill-defined, quasi-professional field that is taught in a range of departments by faculty having diverse academic and professional backgrounds. Their initial reactions to the mandate for outcomes assessment typically have been bemused puzzlement, followed by consternation and finally by apprehension among such educators, who were quick to realize the truth of what Erwin was advising to educators:

> To ignore calls for evaluation is to allow other groups to choose methods of assessment, which are sure to influence educational goals. Besides the new accrediting requirements regarding assessment, both public and private institutions should pay heed to discussions about a proposed national standardized testing program. If a nationwide program is implemented, it is unlikely that the diversities in our institutions will be retained.... if professionals refrain from contributing, then nonprofessionals will go about evaluation unaided.[32]

Other warnings have had equal credence among public relations educators, such as Christ and Blanchard's admonition that, if communication education programs appear to university committees to be fragmented, peripheral or nonessential to a university's overall mission, they are more susceptible to being downsized or eliminated.[33]

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[31]Richard M. Millard, *Today's Myths and Tomorrow's Realities: Overcoming Obstacles to Academic Leadership in the 21st Century*, 165.

[32]T. Dary Erwin, *Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Guide to the Principles, Goals, and Methods of Determining College Outcomes*, 7.

[33]William G. Christ and Robert O. Blanchard, "Mission Statements, Outcomes, and the New Liberal Arts," in William G. Christ, ed., *Assessing Communication Education: A Handbook for Media, Speech & Theatre Educators* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 31.

To a great extent, because public relations is a professional area, although arguably not a profession, public relations educators may not have felt the need to become involved in campus debates about postmodernism, critical theory and related topics and issues concerning the direction of university curricula, i.e., the determination of what students need to know as liberally educated individuals within contemporary global society. This is unfortunate; public relations educators should take active part in these debates, representing public relations education.

Tierney says these debates have come primarily from the humanities and liberal arts and, to a certain extent, from the social sciences. At most institutions, engineering and the professional schools, as well as the natural sciences, have not been involved in these discussions except in a peripheral manner.

Tierney says this underscores how vast portions of college and university faculty have absented themselves from the curricular debate because they have fixed definitions of knowledge. Pedagogy and curricula are unjoined for professors in such professional areas, and knowledge pertains singularly to course content.[3 4]

CONCLUSION

What "outcomes assessment" will do for public relations is what it undoubtedly was intended to do for educational institutions and programs in general. As a "professional" community of public relations educators and practitioners, immediate deliberation will be required to determine what public relations is, together with appropriate definitional parameters; we also will need to consider what knowledge and skills practitioners must have and what are suitable, i.e., valid and reliable, measurements to determine whether a practitioner has such knowledge and skills.

Make no mistake that this will be an easy task! When asked what a public relations practitioner should know, a typical response is "everything." Professional practice varies tremendously, as does academic preparation from institution to institution and from disciplinary perspective to disciplinary perspective.

[3 4]William G. Tierney, *Building Communities of Difference: Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 18.

Practitioners and educator continue to disagree about what an entry-level practitioner should have studied and how she should have studied such curricula.

Furthermore, there is a potent effort to generalize curricula in contemporary U. S. colleges and universities; witness the arguments of Blanchard and Christ in their call for the "New Liberal Arts" and the "New Professionalism."[35] In some quarters, there is hue and cry to return undergraduate education to a primary liberal arts orientation, i. e., a program of study that more closely resembles a "classical" education.

Public relations educators collectively--together with public relations practitioners--need to begin discussions immediately about outcomes for public relations students and how to assess such outcomes. It is certainly true that, if we don't do this collectively and with solidarity, others may do it for us.

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[35]Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, *Media Education and the Liberal Arts: A Blueprint for the New Professionalism* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993).

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